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MUST THE SIGN-LANGUAGE GO ?

Language should be subordinate to thought, not thought to language.

—*Henry Drummond.*

ONE evening last March I sat among the students of the College and enjoyed with them a lecture, by one of my colleagues, on "Man's First Steps Towards Civilization." This lecture was one of a course given during the winter by the members of the College faculty, in turn, on subjects naturally suggested by the line of work followed by each professor in his teaching. These courses have been given to our students for twenty years and the subjects of a few of them will furnish an idea of the wide range of thought thus presented: The Indo-European Family of Languages; Oxygen and Certain Oxygen Compounds; The Monroe Doctrine and the Panama Canal; The Ocean Tides; Student Life in Ancient Athens; What I Saw in Alaska; The Disputed Ownership of Alsace and Lorraine.

All the lectures in these courses have been delivered in the language of signs, with very little manual spelling, and but few words written on the black-board. What I know of the giving of lectures to the deaf through the use of the manual alphabet alone, or speech and lip-reading, leads me to express the opinion that these lectures could not have been enjoyed by assemblages of deaf per-

sons through either of these means with one-half the pleasure and profit with which our students enjoyed them through the language of signs.

Many years ago, in the early days of the College, that master of the sign-language, Rev. Wm. W. Turner, Instructor and Principal of the American School for the Deaf at Hartford, gave several lectures to our students on Natural Science. In closing the course he took an evening to describe the life-work of the great botanist Linnæus. This description stands out clear and sharp in my memory as a masterpiece of sign-making. I do not think any lecture which has reached my mind through the ear has charmed or interested me more than this.

I believe I enjoy lectures given in signs as keenly and understand them as completely as any deaf person can. I feel that my familiarity with the spontaneous language of the deaf from my earliest childhood makes it possible for me to appreciate what lectures in signs are to the deaf, as few are able to do who have learned the language of signs in adult life, and certainly as those cannot who have no knowledge of that language.

I hope it is not assuming too much for me to say that my long-continued relation to the deaf of instructor to pupil has opened my mind, as fully as that of any instructor could be, to the possibility of injurious effects resulting from the use of signs in the effort to give the deaf a command of verbal language. As long ago as 1868, in a paper read before the First Conference of Principals, I called attention to an evil which I felt was then existing in many of our schools, namely, the excessive use of signs in the schoolroom, and urged that manual spelling should be brought largely into use at as early a stage as possible, with a view of securing frequent practice in verbal language on the part of the pupil. Two years later, in 1870, at the Indianapolis Convention, I spoke of the sign-language as a "dangerous thing" in the educa-

tion of the deaf, and urged that it ought to be used "as little as possible." In the efforts which have been made lately to abolish the use of the sign-language altogether in schools for the deaf, these declarations of mine have been quoted to give the impression that I supported this extreme policy. That this does me great injustice will be easily seen by any one who will take the pains to refer to the proceedings of those meetings.

I have always believed, with Hill and other leading German teachers, and with my father, the Doctors Peet, Dr. Noyes, Dr. MacIntire, Mr. Stone, and a host of other American teachers of eminence and success, that the language of signs has its uses at all points in the education of the deaf. It is because this conviction is so strong that I have noticed with sincere regret that some for whom I have a high regard have lately been disposed to do away altogether with the language of signs. That such a result, if it could be accomplished, would produce more harm than good I will attempt to show.

The exclusion of signs from schools for the deaf, if I mistake not, is urged on two grounds and no others. *First*, because their use is thought to interfere with the acquisition, on the part of the pupil, of the power to comprehend verbal language and to use it with a reasonable degree of correctness. *Secondly*, because their use is believed to stand in the way of the development in the pupil of the power of speech and the ability to read the speech of others.

That the excessive and injudicious employment of signs is open to these objections is what I have admitted and urged for twenty years and more. Is there no way of preventing this but by total exclusion? To answer this question in the negative would be equivalent to saying that teachers of the deaf, generally, have so little intelligence and judgment and are so lacking in self-control that they cannot be trusted with a means of instruction

commended as indispensable by such teachers as Reich, the son-in-law and successor of Heinicke, Wagner, Saegert, Gronewald, and Hill, in Germany, because they may possibly abuse it. Would it be reasonable to say that no surgeon should be allowed to use a knife because death has sometimes followed the careless use of that instrument?

But he who would banish signs altogether will naturally demand to be told in what ways signs are useful. Before responding to this I would like to say that I have visited recently three prominent schools for the deaf in this country in which it is declared that signs are not used. In each of these I saw signs used in the classroom, good, clear, forceful "De l'Epée signs." I have never had the pleasure of visiting the Rochester School, but I have the authority of a German teacher of eminence who was at this school last June, and who was, evidently at great pains, particularly informed as to the methods pursued, for saying that in the Rochester School "unrestricted use of natural gestures at all stages of the course of instruction" is allowed. (See the *Annals* for April, 1899, page 202.) I do not speak of these things with any purpose of reflecting on the sincerity or consistency of the managers of the schools referred to, but only to show that the German teachers I have just named, whom some might be disposed to speak of as belonging to a past age, would find, could they shuffle on their mortal coils and step into our schools to-day, ample justification for their claim that signs were indispensable in the education of the deaf.

But I was going to try to show, not that signs are necessary and inevitable, but that they are useful. I think the sentiment quoted from Henry Drummond at the head of this article is worthy of serious consideration by teachers of the deaf. The youngest instructor has had it impressed upon him most vigorously and persistently that his greatest work, from a pedagogic point of view, is

to teach his pupils language. I do not think Drummond's declaration, the justice of which cannot be questioned, that "language should be subordinate to thought, not thought to language," has been so often urged. As a means of developing and stimulating thought, and of explaining the meaning of words and phrases new to a pupil, signs often serve a purpose that nothing else can.

I will ask the reader to observe that I say "often," and not "always," for I am quite ready to admit that in some cases finger-spelled or spoken words, the meaning of which is fully understood, may serve the purpose above indicated. When the teacher can be *sure* that they will, no one would be more ready than I to commend their use. But I am equally certain that in instances almost beyond number the worthy zeal of a teacher to be loyal to a "method" or a "theory" leads to a persistence in the effort to "build language upon language," to "explain words by words," that is barren of good results. The bewildered and wearied pupil declares he understands when he does not, and the teacher is often too tired to apply further tests.

I saw in one of the leading so-called pure oral schools of Germany, in 1897, an exercise that surprised and pleased me. A class of young pupils was being taught a number of new words. Each pupil was required to write, speak, and make the sign for each word. I asked why the sign was demanded, and was told that it was to make sure the child understood the meaning of the word, ample evidence having been had in that school that, when no sign was asked for, the word was to the pupil often nothing more than a meaningless utterance.

Teachers in schools where signs are not allowed in the classroom have told me that they have repeatedly found themselves unable to explain the meaning of a word or phrase, which could readily have been made clear by the use of signs. This not only involves a series of distinct

losses to the pupils, but it forms a habit of not understanding, which is injurious.

Serious as is the disadvantage of the complete abolition of signs from the classroom, an equally great, if not greater, deprivation, in my judgment, is imposed on the deaf by the giving up of the assemblage of the pupils in chapel or lecture-room for the purpose of religious instruction and devotion, and for entertaining and profitable lectures *in the sign-language*. Perhaps some reader may say, "No doubt the lectures given to your college students are all very well, but such things go over the heads of children." My reply is that in our Kendall School we have for years had courses of lectures suited to the capacity of the children, and these have been eagerly attended by them, and have been a great source of profit and pleasure.

But I am loath to continue to undue length the discussion of a subject some may think too well worn already. The pages of the *Annals* are full of the experiences and opinions of leaders in our profession on the uses and abuses of "signs," as one will readily see by consulting the Index. In this it will be found that the use of signs is approved in varying degree and manner by such authorities as Arnold of England, Marchio of Italy, Walther of Germany, and Greene and Gordon of our own country. The testimony of the last named is so pointed and so in accord with my own views that I shall ask the Editor to allow me to make a brief quotation from an article originally prepared for and read to the "parents' class" in Professor Alexander Graham Bell's Experimental School in Washington in 1885, and printed in the *Annals* for October in that year. Dr. Gordon says (*Annals*, xxx, 243):

In my opinion, the sign-language, in the hands of its masters, is an invaluable means of instruction. By it the skilful teacher annihilates obstacles of time and space, and history becomes a living panorama, every quarter of the globe is transported to his school-room and becomes a present reality to his pupils, the stories so delightful to infancy become

a part of their heritage, and the long line of Bible stories, with their sublime lessons, is woven in fadeless colors into their very being. To arouse dormant powers, to convey facts, to interpret relations, to stimulate the imagination, to appeal to the emotions, to regulate the passions, I know of no satisfactory substitute for the gesture-language; and thrice fortunate do I count those deaf children whose youthful minds are developed under the inspiration of the able master whose hands pluck the stars from their courses, who brings the rolling sea to his feet, whose arms become trees, and in whose fingers the budding flowers burst into bloom.

I trust the generous reader will not attribute an allusion to my father's opinions as due merely to filial partiality. For I think it is matter of settled history that, as a successful teacher of the deaf, he stands among the foremost. A large proportion of his pupils acquired that facility in verbal English which is the desideratum and has often been the despair of later instructors.

In the first volume of the *Annals* will be found an article by my father on "The Natural Language of Signs," which is worth, I think, the reading of the progressive teacher of to-day. In this article (page 90) he makes bold to claim that, "so far as motions or actions addressed to the senses are concerned, this language, in its improved state, is superior in accuracy and force of delineation to that in which words spelt on the fingers, spoken, written, or printed, are employed." This claim of the superior accuracy and precision of sign-language, as compared with words, may, perhaps, excite surprise at first thought. But it is believed that its reasonableness will appear when it is remembered that the meanings attached to words are almost wholly arbitrary, very few giving the slightest hint to their signification in their shape or sound, while nearly every gesture used in sign-language carries with it a plain suggestion of its meaning, and in very many instances gives a vivid and easily recognized portrayal of the idea to be conveyed.

I believe I have said enough to establish the claim that

through the use of signs the education of deaf children may be helped forward in many ways, that their mental development may be stimulated, and that useful and entertaining ideas and suggestions may be communicated in the form of lectures. I hope I have convinced most of my readers that every school which banishes the sign-language from its classrooms and chapel robs its pupils of a valuable means of education, thought development and stimulation, for which there are no adequate compensations in increased power to use and understand verbal language or speech. I say *adequate* compensations, for even if it were proved, which it has not been to my knowledge, that the abolition of signs has secured a somewhat improved average standard of verbal accuracy and oral fluency, I have yet to be shown that this gain has not been purchased at a price out of all proportion to its value. My observations in American and European schools where signs are used with moderation and good judgment have satisfied me that in such schools the best "all-round" development of the pupils is secured. So, in answering finally the question presented in the title to this article, I should urge that if there ever was a problem for the solution of which the adoption of the golden mean, rather than either extreme, might be urged, the sign problem should be so solved. Shall men abolish free government and re-enthroned despotism because liberty may run into license? Shall Christians embrace atheism because religion may grow into fanaticism? Shall we all dismiss our doctors and call in the medicine-men of the aborigines because the practice of physic may be perverted to charlatanism and quackery?

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